In 1922, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, the founder of the Palmer Memorial Institute, poured out her heart to the white Christian women of America in the pages of the Missionary Review of the World. She expressed decades of frustration and disappointment as she described with clarity and eloquence the separate and unequal worlds of white and black women in America. “What a chasm there is between us,” she wrote, “deep, fathomless! The Negro woman wonders if there is a place on earth where she can stand and breathe freely and think in terms of a woman.”

Brown’s metaphor of the chasm is reminiscent of a popular version of the evangelical salvation narrative. According to that story, a loving and holy God created humankind for the purpose of fellowship, but humanity soon fell into sin. The fall brought the curse of death and created a chasm that separated humanity from the holiness of God. Humanity remained trapped on the far side of the chasm until God sent Jesus to die on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. The cross of Christ became the bridge across the chasm, over which humankind might cross by faith. By embracing suffering and death, Jesus was able to reach across the chasm between God and humanity and become the way to eternal life.

I submit that it is possible to interpret Brown’s life as an unfinished American passion narrative, to see Brown as a mediator, who looked for a place to stand so that she could reach across the chasm of race and bridge the gap. For Brown, spanning the chasm meant that white America must be made to realize the sin of racism; black America must be redeemed from degradation and despair. Brown did her utmost, not only to achieve these ends through her

vocation as an educator, but in her own existence to incarnate a pathway to racial reconciliation. She endeavored to forge genuine friendships across the chasm of American racism.

While the brutality of overt racism could be lethal, especially in the South, Brown regarded as equally pernicious the subtle racism that persisted among those white Christians who would have regarded themselves as progressives. Even though Brown sometimes swallowed her pride and accommodated the views of racists for the sake of her school, she was never able to reconcile herself to the failure of Christian ethics that left the racist attitudes of white Christians unreformed. She challenged the hypocrisy that created the “deep, fathomless” social chasm between blacks and whites, despite the fact that they interacted daily in myriad and sometimes intimate ways. Brown’s struggle to gain a foothold, to reconcile the curious juxtaposition of intimacy and separation in American racism, and to define “friendship” across the chasm is the subject of this essay.

Charlotte Eugenia Hawkins Brown was a pioneer African American educator and civil rights activist in the first half of the twentieth century, and, for the record, she was a Baptist (which, in retrospect, was a much greater boon to the Baptists than to her). She was born Charlotte Hawkins in Henderson, North Carolina, in 1883, near the place where her grandparents had been slaves. Her mother, Caroline Hawkins, was the youngest of twelve; her father’s identity is unclear. It is possible that he was a former slave. In any case, he played no significant role in her life. In 1888, Caroline moved her family to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she opened a laundry and Charlotte attended the public schools.

Charlotte Hawkins attended the Cambridge English High School (1896-1900) where she made extra money by drawing portraits of fellow students. After a chance encounter in her senior year with Alice Freeman Palmer, the second president of Wellesley College, Palmer
sponsored Hawkins’s education at the State Normal School in Salem. Hawkins left the school after only one year of the two-year course of study so that she could take charge of Bethany Institute, an American Missionary Association (AMA) school in McLeansville—later known as Sedalia, North Carolina (1901). In consideration of the circumstances, Hawkins was allowed to graduate from the State Normal School with her class. The AMA withdrew support after the first year, but Hawkins persevered, opening the Alice Freeman Palmer Institute (1902). The Institute became one of the nation’s leading African American preparatory schools. Hawkins’ brief marriage to Edward Sumner Brown ended in divorce (1911-1916), and another to John W. Moses was annulled (1923), but she remained the innovative and charismatic leader of the Palmer Institute until 1952. She died in 1961.

Friendship across the Chasm

One of the most vexing questions that Brown faced in her personal life was how to negotiate friendships across the chasm of race in America. It was a problem that she discussed frequently in her public addresses and writings. For example, having whites address her in a too-familiar way, by her first name, was particularly irksome to her because she believed that “it was from force of habit in dealing with Negroes as servants, differentiating in no way between us, and not as a term of endearment.”

In the course of her efforts to build support for the Palmer Institute, Brown developed relationships across the chasm with many wealthy white women donors in the North, such as Mary R. Grinnell, a frequent and generous contributor. Like many white supporters, Grinnell was very much in favor of teaching agricultural, domestic and industrial subjects. Perhaps this enthusiasm was due in part to the fact that many whites regarded African Americans as

2 Ibid., 485.
intellectually inferior. Grinnell gave voice to this view in a roundabout way. In her letters, she queried Brown regarding the alleged correlation between race and intelligence. She asked these questions not for herself, she claimed, but on behalf of those who think that the true full blooded negro has not brains enough to learn any thing outside of manual labor. There are those who think if a colored person cares for books it is because they have white blood in their veins somewhere which gives them that taste for learning. A lady once . . . asked if I ever knew of an educated colored person who had no white blood . . . I said yes, I thought I did know of such a person, and I was thinking of you. . . . I began to think that I might possible [sic] be mistaken after all. But I see now your own parents were colored. But do you know anything about the generations back of them? . . . I am expressing the views of some of my race more plainly than those who hold them would dare to but I have always been frank with you and I trust that I always can be. I should like to know your opinion on this subject as I should regard it as more authentic than anything my white friends might tell me.³

In the context of the first decade of the twentieth century, Grinnell’s questions were perhaps not as reprehensible as they seem to us today. Eugenics and “scientific racism” were ascendant; it was even possible for the Bronx Zoo to put a Congolese pygmy named Ota Benga on exhibit with an orangutan in the Monkey House in September 1906.⁴ Nevertheless, such questions must have been disheartening to Brown, especially since they came from a cultured and sensitive woman who frequently signed her letters to Brown, “Sincerely your friend.” Grinnell once wrote to Brown: “I hope you always will continue to come to me with everything, I do not mean hesitatingly but with the assurance you should feel in turning to a friend, who is ever ready to sympathize and advise whenever it is desired that I should do so.”⁵ Indeed, Brown did turn to

³ Grinnell to Brown, 29 May 1909, Charlotte Hawkins Brown Papers (CHBP), Schlessinger Library, Radliffe College.
⁵ Grinnell to Brown, 11 October 1909, CHBP.
her for advice about very personal matters, including whether she should marry or not. Yet Grinnell balked at having Brown stay in her home in New Bedford, Massachusetts. She wrote:

I want you and yet it is with some hesitation that I ask you. If I put you in one of my guest rooms my colored cook won’t know what to think of me and if I put you in the room next to her you will think I am not treating you according to your station in life. I think you will understand if I do not care to create any back-door gossip or to be criticized by my friends. . . . If you do not want to come here for the night I might inquire of a respectable colored family I know if they would take you in. . . . I mean to be cordial and I am sure if you do decide to come and stay with me that you will be comfortable wherever I put you. . . . I shall pay for your car fare from Boston and return.7

Evidently, Grinnell did not believe that acting inhospitably toward her friend Charlotte Brown carried the same stigma as being criticized by her white friends in New Bedford, but she was apparently unaware of such contradictions in her own thinking. She could begin a paragraph by seeming to affirm racial equality, writing, “it seems to me that hereafter the same life is intended for all regardless of race or color,” only to end with an unconscious slight to her friend: “with your education you are able to fill the position you hold without seeming too free with the white people. And if you understand your own position never mind what the rest of the world think. ‘God is in his Heavens, and all’s right with the World!’”8

All was not right with the world, as far as Charlotte Brown was concerned. On the contrary, the world was askew, twisted, and made incomprehensible by the corruption of racism. The power of racism negated her education and achievements and made it impossible for her to know where she stood. In a world where a woman who had paid for a sleeping car berth could be forced from her place simply because of the color of her skin, there was nowhere to feel physically safe and psychologically secure. It was an especially acute variety of anomie—a

6 See Grinnell to Brown, 25 January 1910, CHBP.
7 Grinnell to Brown, 4 March 1910, CHBP.
8 Grinnell to Brown, 21 December 1910.
status inconsistency that no amount of hard work and accomplishment could resolve. In a speech to the New York Urban League, she said:

People have tried to tell me, as they have tried to tell Negroes all over the country, that so long as you keep in your place you won’t meet with [humiliation]. If anybody will define to me what my place is in American life, you will make me happy. . . . It seems to me that my place in American life, that my place in the world, is any place for a human being, and that there is no superiority or inferiority except as it is based on character and achievement.⁹

Given these mixed messages and differing perceptions of reality, Brown recognized that as a descriptor for inter-racial relationships, the word “friendship” must be used in a special, qualified sense. As she wrote of two unnamed white friends in the *Missionary Review of the World*, “I must speak of them as friends for they have met the test, although we are taught that there can be no real friendship except upon a basis of mutual respect. Do these women respect me? Of course they do. They recognize two codes of ethics—one for white women and another for colored.”¹⁰

Friendship and Accommodation

Even so resolute opponent of racism as Brown found it impossible to be consistent in every instance. As courageous as she was, there were times when she accommodated racist views for the sake of making friends for her beloved Palmer Memorial Institute. In a draft of a fundraising letter to local white residents in 1920, she wrote,

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¹⁰ “Cooperation Between White and Colored Women,” 485.
You read the glaring head lines in the newspapers and you, perhaps feel that every negro is a rapist, thief or criminal. . . . What’s the matter dear friend? You don’t hear enough about the good. The Negeros [sic] who are really guilty of these acts are not products of our schools, they do not attend our churches, they do not even come in touch with the thrifty, hard working, reliable negroes who are a credit to the south.\textsuperscript{11}

After enumerating the many productive and respectable vocations pursued by Palmer’s graduates, she included a statement that, to white southern ears, probably sounded very submissive and conservative, while it also included a great deal of ambiguity. “I have respected the best traditions of the south and have tried to do my duty as a Christian young woman.”\textsuperscript{12} She left undefined what she meant by “best traditions” and how she understood her Christian duty.

About the same time, she wrote to Wall Street financier and philanthropist Galen Stone (a faithful northern friend who became Palmer Institute’s largest contributor), “I have succeeded in getting a good strong southern backing. It has taken years to do it, I’ve had to close my eyes sometimes to many things that hurt my heart to make this friendship.” She wanted Stone on the Institute’s board of directors because she felt he would support her if she had to take a stand against other board members who might wish her to suffer further indignities for the sake of dollars. She wrote, “I have already gained the interest of some people who will give me money for the school, but absolutely have no regard for the rights of negro woman [sic] in terms of courtesy.” Once again the issue was in the proper way to address a woman of her position. Brown chaffed at those among the Institute’s supporters who refused to address her as “Mrs.” “The question in my heart and mind, and God only knows how it hurts, is just what are they going to ask me to submit to as a negro woman to get their interest [?] . . . in my efforts to get money now I don’t want my friends in the North to tie my hands so I can’t speak out when I am

\textsuperscript{11} Verso of February 5 letter [fragment], dated 8 December 1920.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
being crushed.”

While she was willing to go to certain lengths to accommodate a hostile culture, there were limits to what she could tolerate. She needed the support of friends like Galen Stone to help her resist others, also called friends, who represented the forces of accommodation. In the chasm of American racism, Brown discovered that the concept of friendship was enigmatic, to say the least.

Friendship and Resistance

Brown did not always submit to the forces of accommodation, and she especially needed her friendships across the chasm when she resisted oppression. She was regularly put out of Pullman berths, she regularly filed lawsuit against those who violated her rights, and she frequently won small settlements. The most memorable case of this kind, judging from the number of times she recounted it, occurred in 1920, when Brown was traveling by rail to the Woman’s Missionary Convention meeting in Memphis, Tennessee. It was the first gathering of southern white Protestant women to focus on racial cooperation, where she was one of four African American women who had been invited to address the conference. Brown was forced out of her Pullman berth by a gang of white men, who gave her the choice of moving to the Jim Crow car or being thrown bodily off the train. Humiliated, she was forced to pass through three cars filled with whites, while the mob glowering at her heels, to get to the Jim Crow car. To make matters worse, there were on the same car, as Brown wrote, “southern white women passing for Christians,” who did nothing to assist her. They were on their way to the same

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13 Fragment, 1921, CHBP.
conference, “where they declared their purpose was to make the Negro woman unashamed and unafraid.”

Brown’s white southern lawyer, Frank P. Hobgood, Jr., of Greensboro, North Carolina, filed suit against the Pullman Company, requesting $3,000 in damages. A year later the suit had not been settled. The company countered with an offer of $200. Wanting to avoid the courtroom, Hobgood advised Brown to accept a small settlement, based on his belief that “half a loaf is better than no bread at all.” He advised Brown to remember the example of Booker T. Washington, who pursued a strategy of accommodation rather than confrontation. He suggested asking for $1,000 in hopes of actually collecting $500.

Brown did not agree. She thought that even $1,500 would only be “partial justice” for the “nervous shock” she had suffered, and she was ready to test “absolute justice for Negroes” in court. She did not want to embarrass her friend, but she declared herself willing to sacrifice his friendship for the sake of her cause. She wrote,

> if, by pushing this case, it will in any way damage your influence as 100 percent American, I should want to withdraw it.

> As for me, a Negro woman, I feel so intently the insults that are heaped upon me by the railroad company that I am willing to become a martyr for Negro womanhood in this instance and give up my chance of holding, as friends, people who would withdraw because of my attitude, . . . conditions have changed considerably for both races and a few of us must be sacrificed perhaps in order to get a step further.

Brown’s friendship with Hobgood survived this incident, and she all but insisted that he serve on her board of directors in 1933. She wrote, “you are not going to desert me in this hour of need, and I know it. You have been my good friend through all these years.”

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15 Hobgood to Brown, 4 October 1921, CHBP.
16 Brown to Hobgood, 19 October 1921, CHBP.
17 Brown to Hobgood, 27 September 1933. CHBP.
Conclusion

Brown encountered a social truth that is perhaps unique to African Americans. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that to be black in America was to be the embodiment of a problem, to live behind the veil of a seemingly irreconcilable double-consciousness that precluded a true self-consciousness, to be measured constantly—and constantly degraded—by an unjust and alien standard. Brown knew what it was to be a problem and to feel that she was an outsider in her own culture—to feel that she had “no place to stand and breathe freely and think in terms of a woman.” According Du Bois, the solution to “the Negro Problem” was work, culture and freedom, not separately or sequentially, but all at once and without delay. Brown attempted to provide all of them at the Palmer Institute, despite the initial resistance of her white supporters—but addressing the needs of African Americans was only part of the task. Du Bois argued further that social progress depends upon “sympathy and cooperation among classes who would scorn charity. . . . [but] in the higher walks of life, in all the higher striving for the good and noble and true, the color-line comes to separate natural friends and co-workers.” Brown attempted to address this aspect of the problem as well, as she tried to develop authentic friendships across the chasm of race. In so doing, she refused to participate in what Howard Thurman once called the “conspiracy of silence” that covered the deceptions by which the strong deprived the weak and the weak circumvented the strong—a conspiracy into which “the question of morality is not permitted to invade.” Brown subverted the conspiracy of silence by forcing her white friends

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20 The Souls of Black Folk, 6-7.
21 Ibid., 112.
to confront the issue of morality where racism was concerned. She practiced what Thurman called "a complete and devastating sincerity." By forcing the moral question to the forefront in her friendships with whites, by insisting that they recognize the humiliation that racism inflicted upon a friend, she created, for herself and for them, a place to stand in the chasm, a foundation upon which, perhaps, a bridge could possibly be built. Unfortunately, as a passion narrative of racial reconciliation in America, Brown’s story is incomplete, and, fifty years after her death, the task of bridging the chasm is barely begun.

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23 Ibid., 70.